I want people to 'laugh, cry with me' through my music: *Indian virtuoso*



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INTERVIEW
EXCLUSIVE

Shujaat Husain Khan belongs to a distinguished musical lineage deeply rooted in the history of Indian classical music. As a celebrated sitar player, vocalist and composer, he has built an international career while remaining committed to the expressive depth and traditions of Indian classical music.

For Khan, music is not merely a performance or a technical accomplishment. It is a deeply personal language through which musicians communicate their emotions and connect with audiences across cultural boundaries. His musical collaboration with Iranian kamancheh virtuoso Kayhan Kalhor brought together two rich musical traditions and created a memorable chapter in his artistic journey.

In the interview that follows, you find the renowned Indian sitar maestro speaking to Iran Daily about the expressive power of the sitar, the importance of improvisation, the integrity of Indian classical music, his musical partnership with Kalhor, and his long-held dream of performing in Iran, a country whose culture and musical sensibilities he deeply admires. Shujaat Husain Khan also reflects on the importance of traditional music education, the challenges of international performance, and why he would rather be remembered as a good human being than simply as a famous musician.



The photo shows the cover of Dil, an album by Indian sitar virtuoso Shujaat Hosain Khan, released in 2011.
mysticamusic.com

SEPAHVAND: You were born into a family whose name is deeply intertwined with the history of Indian classical music. How challenging is it to establish an independent artistic identity while carrying such a rich legacy? How have you developed your own musical signature in terms of tone, phrasing and improvisation, while remaining faithful to tradition?

KHAN: I know the sitar has gone through many changes throughout its history. I think the biggest change was introduced by my father, who changed the instrument from seven strings to six, making it more conducive to his style of playing. He also started pulling from one note to second and fifth. And we play three notes in our family. It is easier to play and closer to the vocal style.

With its resonant, bell-like timbre, sympathetic strings and remarkable capacity for melodic nuance, the sitar is one of the most distinctive instruments in Indian music. In your view, what are the instrument's most important technical characteristics that make it such a powerful vehicle for emotional expression? How do techniques such as meend (glissando), melodic ornamentation and tonal control help a sitar player shape a musical narrative?

You are absolutely right. The sitar has a unique sound and extraordinary expressive potential. Its timbre is remarkable and highly distinctive. I cannot say that this is all there is to it; it is a complete instrument, and there are so many things you can do with it.

One of its distinctive features is meend, which allows you to move through three, four or even five notes from a single note. This is something that sets the sitar apart from many other instruments.

Combined with the beauty of the instrument itself, these possibilities allow a musician to communicate a wide range of emotions.

In Indian classical music, improvisation within the framework of a raga requires both a deep theoretical understanding and a strong sense of intuition and creativity. During a live performance, how do you develop the musical journey of a raga and decide when to remain in the meditative atmosphere of the alap and when to move towards rhythmic momentum and greater rhythmic complexity? Is every performance a different interpretation of a familiar raga?

Improvisation is extremely important in Indian classical music because most of our music is based on it.

A raga gives you the notes you can use and the notes you cannot touch when performing that particular raga. But even when using those notes, you have to approach them in a certain way, with a particular character and emotion that must continue throughout the musical piece.

Improvisation is what allows your own personality to emerge. It is about the character you bring to the music and the way different emotions come together.

Rhythm is also very important. We have beautiful rhythmic cycles of 16, 12, 10 and eight beats, as well as other rhythmic structures. These cycles offer different possibilities for musical expression and allow a musician to convey different emotions.

Performing in the United States, with its cultural diversity and broad spectrum of audiences, offers a unique opportunity to introduce Indian classical music to new listeners. How has your experience performing in different American cities and concert halls compared with performing in India? Have the responses of American audiences, particularly those unfamiliar with raga and Indian musical traditions, influenced your choice of repertoire or the way you structure your concerts?

For me, performing in the United States, Europe or anywhere else in the world is no different from performing in India. I specifically want to present my music in the same way I would if I were sitting in my own country. I have no interest in diluting my music to suit what people call the temperament, mood or understanding of my listeners. They have come to listen to Indian classical music, and I believe they should experience it as it is.

Indian classical music has gained a stronger presence at international festivals and prestigious concert halls over recent decades. In your view, what has enabled this tradition to find audiences across such diverse cultural environments? Is the global appeal of Indian music primarily driven by collaborations with Western and popular music, or does it stem more fundamentally from the intrinsic power of raga, improvisation and its emotional depth?

Indian classical music is deeply researched, and I think one of the most important factors is that it is highly respected in our country. That encourages younger people to become involved in it, research it, enjoy it and present it to others. This makes a significant difference to the development of a musical culture. When people support music, it grows. When they do not support it, the situation becomes very different.

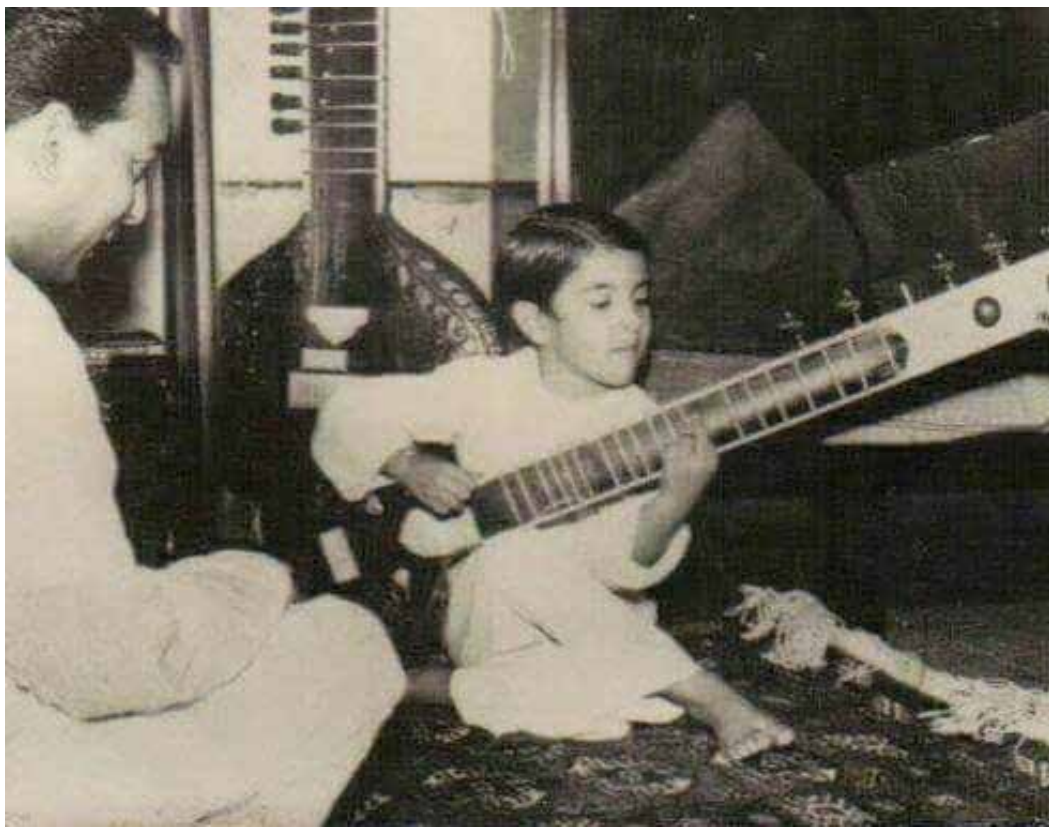
In Pakistan, for example, there are many good musicians, and I am not suggesting otherwise. However, classical music is not sufficiently respected in some circles, and this has affected its development. When music is respected, people want to discover it, experience it and understand it. That support makes a real difference.

Indian classical music has found audiences in different parts of the world. Its journey has taken many forms, but the respect a society gives to its music and the willingness of people to explore it are essential to its continued development.

Your collaboration with Kayhan Kalhor, the distinguished Iranian kamancheh player, represents a remarkable encounter between two rich Asian musical traditions. How did you establish a connection between the melodic and rhythmic structures of Indian music and the distinctive nuances of Iranian music? Did this experience help you discover new expressive possibilities in your own playing or change the way you approach improvisation?

My time with Kayhan was a wonderful moment in my life. We connected when we met, developed mutual respect for one another and enjoyed the entire experience. We performed together and developed a huge following. People followed us around the world to hear our music.

The instruments are very different, of course, and Kayhan is an extraordinarily gifted musician. Playing with him was a great honour and a wonderful experience for me. We spent many memorable moments together.



A rare photo of young Shujaat Husain Khan getting lessons from his illustrious father Vilayat Khan about sitar
SOCIAL MEDIA

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